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Don Praisner steps into wife's seat as council's swing vote

by Janel Davis | Staff Writer

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In his short time on the County Council, Don Praisner has made quite a name for himself — no small feat for the widower of the longest-serving woman to serve on the council and a legislative pioneer.

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During his first full council session the District 4 councilman cast votes to demolish a county-owned house in Bethesda's Hillmead Neighborhood Park area, and was the swing vote to limit free parking at public libraries to two hours. Both those decisions ran contrary to his wife's record.

"Circumstances have made the fifth vote on the council in some situations because of existing [4-4] divisions," said Praisner, in an interview with the Gazette last week.

Fortunately, his council colleagues have not put a lot of pressure on him, Praisner said, but he was lobbied by both sides in the parking and Hillmead issues.

Being the swing vote "is not a position I relish," he said. "Some people enjoy that position, not me."

Praisner, 75, took office May 27 after beating out a group of Democratic challengers, including school board member Nancy Navarro in a special primary election, and Republican Mark Fennel in the general election race.

"He seems to be going out and doing a good job of listening and understanding what constituents are saying, so that's a plus," said Patrick Ryan, who lost to Praisner in the primary election. "I think he should continue doing what he's doing in terms of asking questions."

The Calverton resident ran for office with the support of County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) and four council members. As part of his campaign platform, Praisner vowed to uphold the tenets of his late wife, Marilyn, on smart growth and financial prudence. He also promised to stay in office just long enough to finish out Marilyn's term, which expires in December 2010, calling the job of a council member more of a young person's job.

"Several people told me that once I got here, I would have a difficult time leaving, but I still intend to leave," he said. "Two years is enough for me."

Since his swearing in, Praisner has participated in three weeks of council meetings. Part of his learning curve has included plodding through the mounds of paperwork associated with the job and listening to all the issues.

"I think he's doing a superb job and carrying on the tradition of his wife, which is an independent tradition of calling it as he sees it," said Stuart Rochester, a Calverton community activist and Praisner supporter. "I don't always agree with him, but I respect him and count on him to make sensible choices."

Rochester did not agree with Praisner's decision regarding the Hillmead property, but in that case and all others, Praisner votes resulted from a variety of influences.

"[Marilyn and I] shared a common philosophy on things. Sometimes it's hard to determine how she would have voted," Praisner said. "I usually rely on staff, listen to my council colleagues, but the most important influence is staff

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because they have been here longer than me and know the issues.”

The same day as the Hillmead vote, members were considering whether to allow free parking at libraries. Four current council members, and Praisner's wife, believed patrons should pay to park.

But after a compromise offered to give library patrons two free hours, Praisner switched sides. Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park not-so-subtly reminded his colleague how his wife voted on the same issue years ago.

After a slight pause and audience mumblings, Praisner replied, “Well, it is my first day.”

Although Praisner was not involved in the debate for the current county budget, his presence during the next round of deliberations has already begun. As a member of the council's finance committee, the newest council member can swing the council again — this time for more fiscal restraint and accountability, some say.

“We're in the middle of a recession and I hope that Praisner can help rein in the excessive spending in county government, and be aggressive in looking for government waste and efficiencies,” said Fennel (R), who ran as an extreme fiscal conservative.

Praisner should also require agencies receiving taxpayer funds to provide in-depth details of their expenses, said Steve Kanstoroom, another community activist who also ran for the District 4 seat in the Democratic primary.

In the meantime, Praisner said he is waiting for the budget process to get under way. Also on his agenda is protecting aging neighborhoods. Inevitably, the conversation usually returns to his age, he said.

“Because of my age, people expect me to champion issues related to seniors and senior issues,” he said with a laugh. “We'll see.”

